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THE SPARK

News from the **Rimini Meeting** dedicated to the “thirst for infinity” that shows how an encounter can **reawaken one’s humanity.**

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THE CHOICE OF ABRAHAM AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE PRESENT

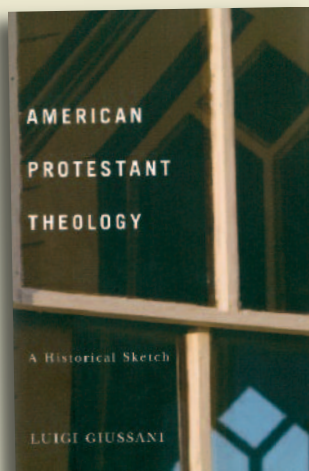
Notes from the dialogue between Julián Carrón, Joseph H.H. Weiler and Monica Maggioni at the Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples. Rimini, August 24, 2015



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LUIGI GIUSSANI

276 pages – format 6 x 9 inches
ISBN-10: 0773541977



In *American Protestant Theology*, Luigi Giussani traces the history of the most meaningful theological expressions and the cultural significance of American Protestantism, from its origins in seventeenth-century Puritanism to the 1950s.

Giussani clarifies and assesses elements of Protestantism, such as the democratic approach to Church-State relations, "The Great Awakening" Calvinism and Trinitarianism, and liberalism. His rich references and analytical descriptions reconstruct an overview of the development of a religion that has great importance in

the context of spiritual life and American culture. He also displays full respect for the religious depth from which Protestantism was born and where it can reach, and expresses great admiration for its most prominent thinkers and spiritual leaders, including Jonathan Edwards, Horace Bushnell, Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich.

Further testament to Giussani's clear-minded and comprehensive knowledge of Christianity, *American Protestant Theology* makes the work of a master theologian available in English for the first time.

MCGILL-QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY PRESS

JUST AS IN THE BEGINNING

An image made its way around in the last month. It was of Aylan, the three-year-old Syrian child who drowned while traveling to the West and was found by a Turkish police officer on the beach in Bodrum. It's impossible to look at that image without feeling pierced, without a cry welling up within: why? We saw it again and again, with the tale of his family's tragic plight. The question was dissected by the press: should they publish it or not, was it right to make their life into an icon like other images that made a mark on people's hearts, and so made their mark on history? Amidst all the discussion, often disconnected from reality, another question arose: if this doesn't get to us, if a fact like this doesn't make us aware of ourselves and the world around us in torment, what can?

Then, little by little, that cry, like many before it, fades. Inevitably, we move on to other things: other stories, other tragedies. Other events that fall into the category of "emergency," a word so exhausted by use that it's no longer in individual headlines, but rather one of the permanent subheadings written above a story to let us know the topic of the article. It is just a "category." Still, that question of why remains intact. It's the same question that Fr. Julián Carrón posed some days ago to a group of CL responsables: "It's not that reality is missing. Reality is constantly provoking us. If we remain in indifference, it's because the 'I' is missing. So, what is it that reawakens it?"


At the Rimini Meeting, there was a lot of talk about various crises: Syria and the Middle East, Islam and religious dialogue, Europe, the economy, education... in other words, reality wasn't missing. Instead, the deeper, more fundamental questions were also addressed. Pope Francis, in his message, phrased it like this: "In the face of our numbness in life, how can one's conscience be awakened again?" How do we cultivate that "healthy restlessness" that we find inside, those questions that reside in the heart of every man and woman (he listed a succession of beautiful examples), that lack that reminds us "like the chime of a clock," that we are made for something great? That we "thirst for God?"

There is no ready-made answer, and there are no formulas or procedures to repeat to guarantee success on their own. Francis reminds us of this, as well, when he says, "for the Church this opens up a fascinating journey, as was the case at the beginning of Christianity." It's an adventure, a road to discover when it appears that everything around us is falling apart.

In Rimini we saw something happening: in the encounters onstage and off, in face-to-face meetings that inspired unlikely collaborations (Russians and Ukrainians working together on an exhibition, or imams and rabbis in dialogue with a cardinal) in faces whose unimaginable joy was inscribed on our memory (the clearest example was Fr. Ibrahim Alsabagh from Aleppo) and in a myriad of stories that would have been unthinkable in theory, but that happened and are chronicled in the pages that follow. It's precisely because they were impossible, but happened, that we need to fully consider them, and understand the implications they offer to our intelligence, so they can become firm steps forward on that adventurous road, and not just nice stories we tell, but end there.

One of the protagonists of the Meeting was Abraham, described as the beginning of God's method. It was the historical moment in which the Mystery called man to say "You," and going out to meet Him, reawakens humanity to its full stature, with all its questions and thirst for meaning, because "without the Mystery there is no 'I,'" as Fr. Carrón reminded us. God changes history through a single person. In a way, it's the same thing we saw happen again in Rimini, both in the spotlight and behind the scenes. We saw snippets of the great adventure, signs of that "fascinating road." The one we hope to follow. **T**

**FATHER IBRAHIM'S
GUARDIAN ANGEL**

 Dear Fr. Julián: I'm a philosophy student. As a volunteer at the Meeting, I was assigned to be the hostess for Fr. Ibrahim Alsabagh. Fr. Ibrahim is a man who lives every moment of his day with exceptional intensity, tirelessly available and attentive, always ready to move with a disarming simplicity; a man certain of being in the hands of Another. Even this way of describing him is not adequate. Perhaps this is enough. During the exchanges of last goodbyes with Fr. Ibrahim, Fr. Pino let him know that many had said, "By looking at him, I understood what it meant to live with a presence within a gaze." From the moment of his arrival at the Pavillion, and even more after the Sunday afternoon meeting, hundreds of people wanted to meet him, to thank him for his witness, to ask for a prayer or a blessing, or just with a timid greeting. Moving short distances required a lot of time because he never denied moment to anyone looking for him. Sunday evening, after saying goodbye to a young man, he said to me, "You see, I don't know why the Lord wanted and allowed me to be here. Perhaps it was not for this afternoon's meeting, but to hug one of them who is looking for me." On another similar occasion, he smiles, and jokingly told me, "You are a tender guardian angel!" Yes, because often I was unable to break into the discussions he was having with those around him, to take him away. He was such a great gift that it was impossible for me not to share him. I, who many times am jealous of my




relationships, found myself totally open, longing to cooperate with his meetings with others. I realized that being with Fr. Ibrahim was changing my face and my way of looking at the other. I desired to love my friends more, and to serve more the place where I was. The morning he was leaving I got up and suddenly I felt alone. He called me from the airport just before he departed for Aleppo (he wanted to make sure I had rested!!!) and to hear his serene voice was the confirmation of everything I saw in those days. It is difficult to settle for less after having lived with such fullness. Such a sort time had passed, but I already worried that melancholy would win out. I realized however, that it was a sweet melancholy and that I had no reason to be concerned, because my change was already determined by the company I had enjoyed up to the last evening. Going later to the hostess office at the Meeting, I started collecting the contact information of a few friends who had met Fr. Ibrahim. Right before leaving the office they asked me, "Are

you available? They need a hostess for the meeting with Matteo Renzi." I had "worked" without a break for the past three days and I was very tired. It never even occurred to me that the Meeting was still going on and so did my work! My answer was a very tired, "Yes, let me change." The first think I thought was, "Fr. Ibrahim would have moved immediately" and I had not the heart to pull back. A week before I would never have done it! Or, I would have complained. I saw the same thing in the way I looked at my friends. It is something that happens even before I get involved and make an effort to "be good."

Ilaria, Milano (Italy)

**I WAS LOVED, FROM THE
FIRST TO THE LAST SECOND**

 Dear Fr. Carrón: Today I have understood a very important thing. It was a very beautiful day. My husband and I spent the day in the countryside home of Giovanna, an Italian woman, harvesting olives with some Iranian friends of ours.



LIFE OF FATHER GIUSSANI

MY GRANDFATHER'S BOOKREST

I went to have lunch with my 89 years old grandfather. At a certain point he asked me, "Did you see that Giussani is over there?" I thought he was referring to the picture he took thirty years ago when he cooked for Fr. Giussani during a vacation in the Dolomites. Instead, I saw a wooden bookrest built with my grandfather's typical mastery, holding the 1300 pages of Fr. Giussani's biography. "I read two hours every day; eight pages per day. How long will it take me to finish it?" he asked me. I ran the numbers. "I would say around six months," I answer. "He has to give me another year, so I can finish reading the book, otherwise He will have to allow me to bring it up there." "Are you enjoying it?" He replied, "You see, when I read it I don't feel lonely anymore. Anyone who reads this book will take something away; there is something lively in it. Not to mention that I was there in those years." My grandfather is not in the Movement, but he admires our ex-



perience from what he saw when my father and us grandchildren were growing up. Some time ago I passed along a sentence from Davide Prospero: "The adult is one who chooses to give himself tools that make him grow." My grandfather realized that reading those pages would help him to not be lonely anymore, but the book was too heavy. So, he put himself to work: he collected the pieces of wood he had in the basement and built himself a bookrest, as well as two arm rests, since two hours is too long to keep his elbows on the table. He gave himself a daily rule, that by now he exceeds since he reads twenty pages a day. I said to myself, "I need to learn to work like him." A sincere question came to mind about who Fr. Giussani was, and what kind of tool his biography is that could lead a man who is living in loneliness, facing the last steps of his life to say, "When I read it, I don't feel alone anymore."

Giacomo, Italy

They were happy and Giovanna was glad for the help we could provide, glad of the sunny day, and for the marvelous food. Nonetheless it only took a couple of things that didn't go as I would have liked and I found myself sad, stuck there, and most of all, incapable of loving those who were there. Once home, disappointed at having wasted a day that way, I picked up the Exercises. I realized

when I would read, "It is experience that makes me realize who I really am," that I always interpreted it as "blow", like saying, "Although you have a lot of nice ideas, in experience, it is clear that you are a petty person." This time instead I thought, "What exactly happened today?" This question put me once again in front of the fact that, in spite of my annoyances and my pettiness, today I have

been loved from the first to the last second of the day. I am loved by the people who surrounded me, loved by my husband, loved by He who put in front of me that marvelous sun. I was moved because in spite of my resistance, it has been like finally letting in another unit of measure that filled sadness with gratitude. Who am I? A person who is loved.

Beatrice, Adelaide (Australia)



THE SPARK OF THE UNEXPECTED

These pages highlight the facts that happened throughout the week during the Meeting. Volunteers, great witnesses, and guest speakers ideologically distant but who feel at home. One encounter after another, the surprise and wonder of humanity being reawakened.

BY DAVIDE PERILLO

“We begin again from here!” The echo of the violin playing Bach is still ringing in the air. Joseph Weiler, smiling, gives a long sigh and says, “I need a minute to recover.” Fr. Julián Carrón is onstage with Weiler and Monica Maggioni (CEO of the Italian media leader RAI) to discuss Abraham and today’s challenges, suddenly interjects: “This is it! It’s from this instant that we are overtaken once again. There’s something in reality that attracts us more than anything that’s missing, more than any limit. In front of something like that, the “I” begins again. Nothing else is needed.

It just has to happen.” The entire Meeting could be boiled down to this “instant”, and the 5,000 people in the hall can feel it. With seven consecutive days of 78 presentations, 220 guest speakers, 15 exhibits, with breathtaking beauty throughout... all of it summed up in that one brief exchange of words which inspired a burst of grateful applause.

It was the Meeting of poet Mario Luzi, whose longing for the infinite is expressed in the lines of his poem, giving us one of the most beautiful titles for the event, “What is this lack of, oh heart of which all of the sudden you are full?”. It was also the Meeting of Abraham, beginning with

“What is this lack a lack of, oh heart, of which all of the sudden you are full?”

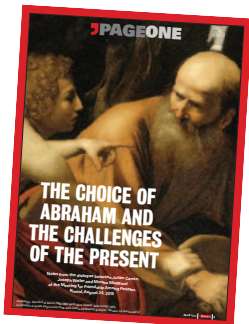


our thirst for Him and offered the answer awaited by all, even without being aware of it. Only the initiative of God the Creator could fulfill the breadth of the heart, and He came to us to allow us to find him just as we would find a friend.” A friend, or, as the Jewish scholar Weiler would say, an *ally*. What does this alliance, this covenant with God generate? What kind of friendship can it introduce among men and people? We saw this on a dozen occasions. On Thursday, the first day for this year’s Meeting, a cardinal (Jean-Louis Tauran), a rabbi (Haim Korsia) and an imam (Azzedine Gaci) gathered in the same hall for a presentation. Christians, Jews and Muslims: the “Abrahamic” religions. Are they part of the problem, the root of countless conflicts we see breaking out, or are they part of the solution? Moments earlier, the Meeting heard the warm greeting from Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary General of the United Nations, along with the fervent warning of Sergio Mattarella, President of Italy, on the “seeds of the third world war” and our responsibility in turning the tide (“it’s up to us to do away with hate, build up trust and cooperation, and show the advantages of peace”). There, in the conference hall, you could see trust growing. The Cardinal closed his dialogue with an invitation: “Thanks to all of you who open the door to tell those who are wandering, ‘Come and see, God is not dead!’”

FIRST LADY AND GAUDÍ. Many people entered through that door, including international guests like Rula Ghana, the Christian First Lady of suffering Afghanistan. She wore herself out in open discussions with other attendees (“Because my job is to listen to people”) demonstrating her clear ideas on the topic of dialogue: “How can we make it happen? We simply need to live it.” Another example was José Al- ➤

the discussion between the leader of CL and a noted Jewish law scholar, moderated by the new president of RAI (the English translation of the video is available at: <http://www.meetingrimini.org/eng>).

And then came the exhibit curated by Biblical scholar Ignacio Carbajosa and archeologist Giorgio Buccellati. Simply everything that happened in the convention center was marked by that event which happened, according to God’s method: in an unpredictable moment the Mystery reveals itself to



INSIDE
The dialogue on Abraham between Julián Carrón and Joseph Weiler at the Meeting.

man in time and space, presents itself as a “You,” this Mystery who uses one person to communicate with the entire world. We saw it *happen*. Over and over again.

It happened in response to Pope Francis’ message, a tribute to the heart that is seeking, and to the lack inside each of us (“it’s not evidence that we were born ‘flawed,’ it is rather a sign

that our nature is made for great things”), and at the same time it is a proclamation of “the infinite Mystery, [Who] bowed to our nothingness and

» muzara, president of the Association for the Beatification of Antoni Gaudí, who came for the exhibit about the friendship between Etsuru Sotou, a sculptor working on the Sagrada Família Basilica in Spain, and Sandro Rondena, the architect who, before his recent passing restored the Abbey of Morimondo. Almuzara said he was “moved by how much I feel at home in everything, with everyone.”

UNTHINKABLE JOY. It’s the same spark that lit in the hearts of those who met the “other Abraham” of the event: Fr. Alsabagh, pastor of a church in Aleppo, Syria. In fact, his name is Ibrahim. His story, which followed the trying and sorrowful words from Fr. Douglas al Bazi, a priest from Erbil, made an impact on the entire Meeting (see story on p. 11). His face made an even greater impact: full of an unthinkable joy for a man who lives and suffers with his people literally within shooting range of the horrors of ISIS. He must’ve been asked 100 times, at his booth and in the hallways, “How can we help you?” He responded the same way every time: “With your faith. Pray and live out the faith,” often adding an invitation that left others speechless, “Take courage, continue as you are and we’ll continue as we are-united.” He’s telling *us* to take courage.

Perhaps this has something to do with Abraham and the Promised Land, which Weiler spoke about: “It’s not just a territory. It’s another type of life, another type of relationship between



ON THE STAGE. Among the shows, *The Tidings Brought to Mary* by Paul Claudel (here); an evening of poetry *The Track - Modern Hearts*; and many concerts, as the one by Alexei Melnikov.

one man and another, between man and God.” There were certainly dozens of times that this different way of living was there for all to see. For example, the dinner that brought together all the guest speakers in the middle of the Meeting, so they could get to know each other. It was an unusual bunch, with an Orthodox bishop next to an Egyptian law scholar, journalists and philosophers, managers of international businesses and missionary sisters. A place where, at one moment during the evening, you began to think that the heart of it all was summed up by a man at the next table who was totally paralyzed, leaning over his wheelchair. His name is Ugo Rossi, he is living with Lou Gehrig’s disease and is accompanied by the loving gaze and care of his wife Silvia. He can’t say anything; he can’t do anything. He can only love and be loved. That’s enough.

Looking around you can understand better what Lyndon Neri, a Chinese designer, said in awe, “It’s the first time that I’ve seen an event that touches on

everything.” He wasn’t just referring to the variety of topics discussed, that the Meeting included European issues, space exploration, constitutional law (with Sabino Cassese and Marta Cartabia) and linguistics (with Noam Chomsky, one of the greatest living intellectuals, participating by video conference). The week spoke about *humanity* and everything that it implied. In its wholeness. Pupi Avati, a master of Italian cinema, when asked about Rimini said, “There’s no longer anyone in Italy who can propose a shared initiative, something that can involve and attract others. Here, it’s happened. It’s a miracle. Whoever thought up the Meeting thought up something impossible.”

Impossible. Just as Sara, Abraham’s elderly wife, said to God who announced that they would have a son. Just as we so often think, in our stubborn attempt to measure and possess reality, which doesn’t belong to us: it’s unpredictable, it’s the place where the Mystery reveals Himself as He »

 **NOAM CHOMSKY** Professor Emeritus of Linguistics at MIT



“We have to recognize our inability to penetrate what David Hume recognized to be the ultimate secrets which reside in that obscurity in which they ever did, and ever will, remain. The idea that there should be limits to human understanding is often taken today to be a reversion to mysticism, and it’s a heresy dismissed as mysticism or mysterianism... The real mysticism is the belief that our capacity to understand is boundless.”



POPE FRANCIS : "WE WERE NOT BORN 'FLAWED.' OUR NATURE IS MADE FOR GREAT THINGS"

The Message from Pope Francis for the 36th edition of the Meeting for Friendship Amongst Peoples.

The thought provoking and poetic phrase, selected as the main theme for this year, emphasizes the heart inside each of us, which St. Augustine described as "**restless heart, one that is never satisfied and is always looking for something that will fulfill its expectations.**" This quest is expressed through questions about the meaning of life and death, of love, work, justice, and happiness.

However, to be worthy of finding an answer it is necessary to take one's humanity seriously, always cultivating this healthy restlessness. In this effort—as Pope Francis says—"we may need but think of some ordinary human experience such as a joyful reunion, a moment of disappointment, the fear of being alone, compassion at the sufferings of others, uncertainty about the future, concern for a loved one" (*Evangelii Gaudium*).

This leads us to one of today's big questions: in the face of so many partial answers, which offer only "false infinities" (Benedict XVI) and produce a strange anesthesia, how can the questions we all carry inside be voiced? **In the face of our numbness in life, how can one's conscience be awakened again?** For the Church, this opens up a fascinating journey, as was the case at the beginning of Christianity, when people kept themselves busy in a life without the courage, strength, or seriousness to ask decisive questions. As St. Paul experienced at the Areopagus, speaking of God to those who had reduced, censored or forgotten the question, "why?" is perceived as something distant, disconnected from real life [...]

Therefore, none of us can begin a dialogue about God without being able to fuel the lamp that burns in the heart, without accusing anyone's limitations—which are also ours—and without pretention, but rather welcoming and listening to anyone. The duty of Christians, as Pope Francis loves to remark, is to begin processes rather than to occupy spaces. **And the first step lies in reawakening that sense of lack that our heart is full of and that very often lies under the burden of frustrated efforts and hopes. Yet "our heart" is still there, and is always searching for something.** Today's drama lies in the imminent risk of negating the identity and dignity of the person. A worrisome ideological "colonization" is diminishing the perception of the authentic needs of the heart while offering limited responses, which do not measure up to the scope of the search for love, truth, beauty, and justice that is in each individual [...].

Still, our heart is never content, as Pope Benedict XVI said when talking to youth in San Marino, "[it] is a window open

to the infinite." Why do we have to suffer and eventually to die? Why do evil and contradiction exist? Is life worth it? Is it still possible to have hope in the face of a "third, piecemeal world war" and with so many brothers and sisters being persecuted and killed due to their creed? Is loving, working, making an effort, and committing oneself still meaningful? **What is the destiny of our life and of the people we never want to lose? What are we doing in this world?...** These questions are in the minds of everyone, children and adults, believers and non-believers alike. Sooner or later, at least once in our life, [...] each of us has to come to terms with one or more of these questions. Even the most stubborn deniers cannot completely eradicate them from their lives.

Life is not an absurd desire; the lack is not evidence that we were born "flawed," it is rather a sign that our nature is made for great things. As the Servant of God Monsignor Giussani wrote, "human needs constitute a reference, an implicit affirmation of an ultimate answer which lies beyond the experiential aspects of existence. If the hypothesis of a 'beyond' were to be eliminated, those needs would be unnaturally suffocated" (*The Religious Sense*).

To be worthy of finding an answer, it is necessary to take one's humanity seriously.

For this reason, God, **the infinite Mystery, bowed to our nothingness and our thirst for Him; He offered the answer awaited by all even without being aware of it,** as they sought it in their own success, money, power, in all kinds of drugs, in asserting their own momentary desires. Only the initiative of God the Creator could fulfill the breadth of the heart, and He came to us to allow us to find Him just as we would find a friend. Thus we can rest even in stormy waters, because we can be sure of His presence. [...]

With this year's theme, the Meeting can contribute to an essential task of the Church, i.e. to "stimulate a desire for this growth, so that each of us can say wholeheartedly, 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (*Evangelii Gaudium*) [...]. Jesus "came to show the love which God has for us. [...] It is a love which is powerful and real. [...] It is a love which heals, forgives, raises up and shows concern. [...] It is a love which draws near and restores dignity. We can lose this dignity in so many ways. But Jesus is stubborn: He gave His very life in order to restore the identity we had lost" (Pope Francis). This is the contribution that the Christian faith offers to everyone, of which the Meeting can be a witness, especially through the lives of those who make it happen.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State

» wishes. For example, in the face of the Buddhist monk Shodo Habukawa, with childlike happiness since he discovered how to combine *Shomyo* prayer and music from the Christian tradition.

There was another member of the political left making his way through the convention center: Fausto Bertinotti, former leader of *Rifondazione Comunista*. He told his story in one of the presentations. He participated in the discussion on Abraham (“I went in with a lot of questions, and I left with even more”). He saw, he asked, and discussed. And he was moved by the exhibit about Metropolitan Anton of Sourozh, in front of Aleksandr Filonenko, who didn’t know who that man so moved by the phrase “God believes in man” was. “I told him, look, we will always be united.” Bertinotti left in silence, but he came back a few minutes later to say, “I don’t know how to express how grateful I am to you all.”

IN THE PARKING LOT. It was the same exhibit that was created by an unusual working group (bringing together Ukrainians, Belarusians, Russians and Italians). The official presentation had its own historical import: three Orthodox on the same stage (Ukrainians Filonenko and Costantin Sigov with Belarusian Dima Strotsev) with a single Catholic—Fr. Francesco Braschi—who did nothing beyond introduce them. Filonenko began citing Anton, “God allowed us to meet each other today.”



FR. GIUSSANI. The space dedicated to the CL founder and to the 60 years of the Movement, edited by Dario Curatolo, film maker of the video *The Beautiful Road*.

A good summary of the Meeting. Those words could have been said by everyone. For example, by those who worked at the exhibits, where worlds collided: the art of the Duomo in Florence, the American Millennials, the scientists who delved into water, the seven contemporary artists behind the exhibit “Keeping the Flame Alive” (where, by the way, a film by Marina Abramovic, “daughter of Abraham,” was a big hit).

Even the volunteers could say the same. There were nearly 2,300 who took on long shifts, intense conditions and many questions about “why am I here?” When the daily newspaper printed an article about the wretched life of the “parking attendants” who spend hours out in the sun and see little or nothing of the actual event, a priest from Brianza started to go visit them every day, bringing drinks and snacks. Then there’s Margherita, a

student from the Catholic University of Milan, who after pestering a police officer for 3 days to buy a raffle ticket saw a conversation open up: he asked questions, she told her story. After a while, he admitted he was floored by the presentation by Carrón and Weiler because it “shed a new light on my life.” Abraham, once again. Once again, God’s method: the unexpected.

Among the last presentations was the witness of Grégoire Ahongbonon. He lives in Ivory Coast where he helped found a non-profit, based on an encounter with a sick man (“I started to see him with new eyes, because I understood that he was Jesus appearing in front of me”), and has since grown in humble certainty: “I am nothing, but this is God’s project. He goes out and seeks who He wants”, and when He wants. “It’s surprising that the Mystery chooses Abraham, chooses an ‘I,’ to change the world,”

BAN KI-MOON Secretary General of the United Nations



“Our world today is marred by conflict, inequality and growing divides, but everywhere I travel I also see people fostering under recon and hope. That is what brings you to Rimini. I believe in the power of people, ideas and the human heart. I thank you for coming together to imagine a better world and to build it.”

commented Marco Bertoli, a psychiatrist and friend of Grégoire. “Is this method doomed to fail, or is it the most realistic method out there? We know what was born from the call of Abraham.”

ONE LIFE AT A TIME. An “I” was born. And from there, a people. Just like Fr. Charly Olivero described in his Villa 21-24, a slum in Buenos Aires, where a community has been born one encounter at a time, one life at a time, risking everything on the “faith in the fact that the other person has a gift to give and is able to share,” and that “God has a lot to give us through that person.” It was almost a foreshadowing of the title for next year’s meeting “For me, you are a Good.”

Maybe this is what makes people like fashion designer Brunello Cucinelli say “this place has a vision.” Or Cardinal George Pell, Vatican “financial chief” and author of the thoughtful book *God and Caesar*, who stated that he had come back to “listen and to learn.” Maybe this is what inspired even Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who was awaited with great expectation at the Fiera, to come to Rimini “joyful and grateful,” as he had written years ago to Graziano Grazzini, Council member from the Tuscany Province and “ciellino” who passed away in 2006. He was a political opponent for Renzi, but also a “friend to many of you and to us” and a witness of a “way of life.” Another kind of life: what Abraham was promised. **T**

THE FRAGRANCE OF CHRIST AMIDST THE BOMBS

Excerpts from the presentation by **FR. IBRAHIM ALSABAGH**, pastor of Latin Rite Catholics in Aleppo, who told the story of life in the “line of fire.” Just 50 yards from terrorists...

To try to introduce you to the situation of Christians, of all Syrians, a single word suffices: we live in chaos, in a total lack of order. Aleppo is divided into dozens of sections, controlled by various jihadist groups. We live in the section of the city under government control. We are deprived of everything, especially of safety, because the militia attacks don’t spare houses, or mosques, or churches, neither children nor the elderly. Many parts of the city have been completely destroyed, such as the ancient Christian neighborhood close to us that is now in ruins. The attacks are continuous, and they’re getting closer to our monastery, to the immensely beautiful church of St. Francis; we’re really in the line of fire and we don’t know when we will be hit. We’re under fire. The onslaught continues and breeds

death: many mutilated, many driven away, there is so much terror and bitterness in people’s hearts. Food prices are sky high and people can’t afford it. Those who were wealthier have left by now; those still there with us are the poorest. We’re short on medicine and health care as well because many doctors have already left the country. We’re short on water, which is a deadly problem that keeps getting worse. Jihadist groups control the pumps and re-direct the water to the river to keep people from drinking. Our houses have neither water or electricity. We suffer incredible thirst, and some have even died of it.

How can you convince a Christians to stay? Why should they stay? It is better to escape. It surprised us to find out that many of our young Christians, those who are very well educated, would be willing to **>>>**

J CARD. JEAN-LOUIS TAURAN President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue



“More than ever, in our pluralistic societies, religions and their followers have to be out in the world, with goodwill and sympathy for everyone and aware of being called to a three-fold challenge: the responsibility to live their identity, the courage to be different, and sincerity of intention. Then we will discover that the future is really just the present ordered in such a way that God’s plan can be realized, that is, to bring happiness to every person.”

»» throw themselves into the sea to get to a country where it's safe. More and more people are leaving, or will leave Syria. For us Christians of the Middle East, especially in Aleppo, it's like living out the book of *Revelation*, which I meditate on every day: the horses of death, the thirst, and illnesses that will come at an unknown time... suddenly. We live in total and continuous instability.

What is our life like there? What can we brothers do, just 50-60 yards from the jihadist militants? The poor people look at us with hope, expecting many things from us. Our responses are not passive—we have to be patient and carry the cross every day, as they are immediately applicable. Our response, which is the response of faith, of the Resurrection, requires a positive action: it means being ever attentive to the movement of the Spirit, to the needs of the people, Christians and Muslims. When a woman knocks at the door, asking for water, it matters not that she has a veil or not, but that she is thirsty. The same goes for starving children and those who are fleeing bombs and need to find safety.

CREATIVE ELEMENT. My fellow brothers and I suffer a lot, not only because of our own personal suffering, which is important and invaluable, but also because we see men and women robbed of their dignity. It's the suffering of Christ crucified today, in humanity, in Christians and Muslims alike. Through a profound posture

of listening to what the Lord says and to the cry of the innocent, we are able to understand how to respond. For those heavy crosses, we really have to learn from Jesus who, during His three-hour crucifixion, still knew how to think of others, of Mary's future, of John and the salvation of those close to Him, of the good thief. Despite His suffering, He was thinking about how He could save not only the whole world with his redemptive action, but of each individual neighbor suffering with Him. He thought of something even more beautiful: forgiveness. Forgive: to forgive those who crucified Him, even though they didn't ask. Our response has a creative element, it comes from faith, from Jesus' example. To face the water shortage, we hired drivers and little trucks with tanks and pumps. On the last run we had 500 families on the list but we only managed to visit 30 or 40 a day. We opened the well at the monastery and, with the help of volunteers, distributed many liters of water every day from morning to evening. We thank God we have drinking water. People come even from far away, from morning to evening. Many elderly people who live alone can't manage to come get water so, with volunteers between 12 and 18 years old, we take water to them at least every other day.

We've been transformed: some days I look at myself and laugh because I, who love books and theological discussions, instead find myself acting

THE OTHER ABRAHAM.
Fr. Ibrahim Alsabagh, 44 years,
Franciscan of the Order of Friars Minor
in Custody of the Holy Land.

as a firefighter, a nurse, a nanny and, on top of all of this, a priest. But it's really beautiful because this is the authentic experience of one who is consecrated, who like laypeople, hear the call to serve and to build up the Church.

OUR FIRST DUTY. Fear reigns in many hearts and the suffering is very great, not only for Christians but also for the Muslims who are ashamed of what is happening. We don't know when it will end, just like the persecution of the first Christians, but it doesn't matter when it ends, the important thing is not knowing how to save ourselves but to witness Jesus Christ. We also need to think of a political solution, an action plan, but our first duty is to be witnesses of the

 **MARIA ANGELA BERTELLI** Xaverian Missionary in Bangkok, Thailand



"Why does God treat me this way? Why would he give me a son who is sick? Why do I have to die? Why, why why... The questions are the same, for 2,500 years or more. Everything was in crisis and they weren't certain of the Resurrection. However, it is either a human invention, or it is a revelation: a concrete fact that you cling to and that pulls you with it. The world exists. We just have to recognize Who gives it to us."



communicate these values without saying anything. A few days ago, a Muslim who had always worked with us came to me and said, “Father, when I see how people come to get water, with a smile and a great peace in their hearts, without fighting, without yelling... I, who’ve been all around Aleppo and see how they’re killing each other to get to wells, am amazed. You are full of peace and joy. You are able to share with others, including with Muslims, with so much peace. Father, there’s something different about all of you.”

WE’LL LOVE MORE. Many dream of escaping, which is natural; they have experienced every kind of evil you could imagine. But we’re convinced that if the Lord, on a certain day in history, at the beginning of the Church, planted the tree of Christianity in the culture of Syria, of the Middle East, then we Christians today don’t have the right to take this olive tree and plant it somewhere else, as it’s God’s will that we bear fruit there. The roots of our faith are there in the land St. Paul passed through; it’s the land of our martyrs, and many families are convinced that staying is a great, important mission. Just imagine if all the Christians left the Middle East and came to Europe: think how long it would take for the Lord to sow the seed of Christianity again. Our presence there is a mission, and we’re staying. We’re not giving up, we’ll love more, forgive more, witness more. With faith, hope and >>>

Christian life, carrying the cross with love, forgiving, and thinking of the salvation of others as well. We’re 60 yards from the terrorists who breed death and terror. Still, in our community we offer our suffering every day for their salvation; we pray for them, we forgive them. A woman who lives close to us, where most of the families were Christian, was complaining because many Muslims have come to live near her—they’ve rented or bought homes that belonged to Christians. She felt that something major had changed—the air of the streets, the eyes of the people—and it made her uneasy. I told her, “Couldn’t it be that God permitted the people and the environment around us to change so that the fragrance of Christ can reach them, too? Could it be a

beautiful mission that the risen Lord is asking of us?” If that’s the case, there’s no reason for uneasiness, but to think only of what our risen Master is asking of us, of how we can witness the faith to the people who come.

NOT AFRAID. We have so much to communicate. We’ve learned from Church’s history that a Christian is not afraid of anything: not of confrontations, nor diversity, nor of opening the doors to others. He’s not afraid of living with anyone. The Christian has a treasure in his heart that is so solid that he can freely dialogue with everyone without losing his nature; or rather, his very nature is made of dialogue. That is what we Christians there, in the middle of a city that’s half rubble, try to do with everyone. Often we manage to

RULA GHANI First Lady of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan



“I believe in explaining to young people that the journey of life begins from oneself, from the ‘I.’ It is the young person who has to make a way for himself, because nothing comes on a silver platter. What can really help with this is working in service of the community, and there are opportunities out there. ‘What will give my life meaning?’ young people ask. I discourage them from too much introspection, but instead to go outside of themselves.”

"PEOPLE LOOK YOU IN THE EYE"

Nephew of the Kennedys and Chairman of the Special Olympics, **TIMOTHY SHRIVER** tells us about himself and his first time at the Meeting.

by Paolo Perego

"It's amazing. They talk about everything here, and people look you in the eye." Timothy Shriver just finished his first presentation at the Meeting. He's 56 years old, Catholic, and has five children. Son of Eunice Kennedy, sister of JFK, he is a branch on one of the most influential family trees in the U.S. With a background in education, he is now the Chairman of the Special Olympics, the association of over 4 million athletes in 170 countries that sponsors over 20,000 events each year. Founded by Eunice in 1968, the organization was left to his leadership after his mother's death. Transporting the audience to the stands of a stadium and through the music of the Beatles, he told the story of this "movement" in the attempt to show that "diversity, our lack, is a road" to personal fulfillment. "Who on earth do I think I am?" is the first step. Because, as he said later, the goal in life is self-discovery.

To be a father. "In all of this I discovered a God different from the one I knew. Not a powerful judge, but someone who loves me. One who forgives, and that changed everything. There are no shortcuts in front of a God like that." For example, in his life as a father: "You can love your children, but love them if they do well in school, if

you know what I mean. One time, I met the mother of a child with disabilities. I asked her what she needed. She said, 'My son has already given me everything; he taught me how to love him.' There, I understood what it means to be a father."

Fully Alive. The words "all of a sudden" in the title of this year's Meeting struck him: "'All of a sudden,'" he said. "It's not something we're used to attributing to God.

'All of the sudden' means falling in love, when your eyes meet with someone else's... The mystics tell us that you experience God through reflection, through silence." And how do people look you in the eye: "Often people come up to me to ask for help, for money, or for work. Here, I want

them to meet *me*." To the question of what brings fulfillment in life, he responded, "I could say doing what I like, writing, for example. Or... when I recognize God's presence inside of me, in what I do... I'm fully alive." Which, is the title of his recent book. "It means seeing what's there, in nature, in reality. 'Practicing the presence' as one friar used to say. Discovering God in yourself and recognizing Him in others. Seeing God is the goal of life. So you can discover who you are. Again, who do I say I am?"



Timothy Shriver.

» charity, we'll continue our journey, which is the Way of the Cross. We know that Christian life isn't easy for you here either, for a child trying to make a serious journey with the Lord, for those who live in Italy, in Germany, or the United States... it's always a journey on a narrow road: so many difficulties, but many victories. Our life begins with suffering and we live with death as well, but we are not afraid because we have the strength of the Resurrection. Is this not the first mystery of Christianity? Thanks to the faith we know our sufferings carry great meaning, meaning that is redemptive for us and for those who kill us, and even for the whole world. It's the reason to live, and the reason to die.

In Aleppo I see countless signs of the Resurrection: for example, having Mass every day from the beginning of the crisis up to today is already a miracle in my mind. That we're still alive is a great miracle. We are more appreciative of the gift of life, and more full of gratitude every day to God who gives us so much. Going back to the "lack" mentioned in the title of the Meeting: for me, seeing the search for God, the thirst for a life in communion with God in Christians, in priests and in bishops, is a sign of the Resurrection. I see this reawakening of a great search, and the experience of a great void, in our brothers and sisters of other religions as well. In the face of fundamentalism, questions become essential: is the journey we're following the truth? How often we see those seeking God, including amidst our Muslim brothers and sisters: those who knock on our door, who ask about Jesus Christ, who come into the church to hear the Word. So much yearning and thirst has been reawakened. In the persecution, in all the suffering we're living, we are certain that this too is a clear sign that the risen Jesus is present, still, there in Aleppo.

(This text has not reviewed by the author) **I**

THE CHOICE OF ABRAHAM AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE PRESENT

Notes from the dialogue between Julián Carrón,
Joseph H.H. Weiler, and Monica Maggioni
at the Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples.
Rimini, August 24, 2015.

Caravaggio, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, (1602-1603), detail. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

The images of these pages are drawn from the exhibit of the Meeting of Rimini: "Abraham: The birth of the 'I.'"

**Notes from the dialogue between Julián Carrón, Joseph H.H. Weiler, and Monica Maggioni
at the Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples. Rimini, August 24, 2015.**

MONICA MAGGIONI. Good evening everyone. I think all of us feel a bit of emotion this evening, because we are trying to look together at a complex topic: a title like “The choice of Abraham and the challenges of the present.” Above all, we are trying to do it in a particular way, a way that started with a conversation among three friends who have decided to accept a truly great challenge: to overturn a way of story-telling, while staying centered on the things that are said, thought and felt. So then, let’s try to travel this road together, and so, let’s begin to tell the story.

ABRAHAM AND THE BIRTH OF THE “I”

First voice. “The Lord said to Abraham: ‘Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you’” (Gen 12:1-3).

Second voice. “Here, what leaps out at you is that the most realistic project for the life of Abraham is not his own, but the project of an Other. And if you accept this in its initial manifestation, you then have to verify it over time. Thus Abraham will experience familiarity with that Presence that bowled him over and dragged him far from home in the episode by the terebinth of Mamre (Gen 18) in which the mysterious Being will be his guest, to be fed and served under the shade of the tree “while the day was growing hot” (L. Giussani, *Alla ricerca del volto umano* [In Search of the Human Face], Bur, Milano 2007, p. 24).

Third voice. “The idea was that a human being should become real before it can expect to receive some message from the superhuman; that is, it must be speaking with its own voice (not one of its borrowed voices), expressing its actual desires (not what it imagines that it desires), being for good or ill itself, not any mask, veil or persona.” “How can they (i.e. the gods) meet us face to face till we have faces?” (C.S. Lewis, *Letter to Dorothea Conybeare*. Quoted in *Letters to a Sister*, by Rose Macaulay, edited by Constance Babbington Smith, Collins, London 1964, p. 261).

MAGGIONI. We have heard the words from Genesis, Fr. Giussani and Lewis. Joseph Weiler, let’s start from there, from this Abraham in relationship with the birth of the “I.”

JOSEPH H.H. WEILER. For me, the event of Abram, or Abraham, is a revolution, or rather, three revolutions. I’ll start with the first. I do not agree, Fr. Carrón, that this was the first time God intervened in history. There was the flood, and God spoke to Adam. He spoke to Cain, and told him, “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the soil!” And He speaks to us. God had already spoken. But the first revolution in Abraham was in the nature of the conversation between God and man. For me the key word is *Covenant*. God *offers*—does not *impose*—a Covenant to Abraham. It is the first Covenant. Why do I insist that the Covenant is so important? Because in a Covenant there are two parties, and both are sovereign. “Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house” is not a command. It is a proposal. “I propose that you go forth, I propose a promised land: but it is up to you to decide.”

It is this nature of the Covenant which makes the other responsible, in which the other must assume his responsibility, it is not obedience: it is the acceptance of a man created in the image and likeness of God, who also has the opportunity to say “no” to God. In fact, when God says to Abraham: “Go forth from your land” He anxiously awaits to see how Abraham will respond.

This is the first revolution: not the fact of speaking to man, but the nature of the conversation between two sovereign parties.

MAGGIONI. So this is already a step further.

JULIÁN CARRÓN. Precisely this “I” capable of answering is what emerges for the first time with Abraham, because the relationship of familiarity that God had begun with human beings, in creating them, was interrupted: they no longer accepted the relationship with their Creator. At a certain point, God wanted to enter anew into relationship with those beings who had distanced themselves from Him. Well aware, so to speak, of the need for an acknowledged and lived relationship with Him for the full actualization of the human person, God took an unexpected initiative: He wanted to intervene again, entering into history and

“God took an unexpected initiative, calling a man to reawaken his ‘I,’ to cause him to be born.”



Marc Chagall, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1960-1966, detail, Nice, Musée national Marc Chagall.

calling a man, Abraham, to reawaken his “I,” in a certain sense to cause him to be born. In fact, the proposal of the Covenant is what raised up an “I” able to respond to God, conscious of its own irreducible uniqueness and of its own task in history; it is the question of a You who generates an “I” as one who is able to respond. This is what is stunning in the story of Abraham; as Professor Giorgio Buccellati said, for the Mesopotamians it was impossible to speak informally to Fate, to Destiny. To see that the substance of the “I” is a relationship with a you, as we learn from the story of the Covenant, we need only observe our own elementary human experience; it is not necessary to imagine what happened in the time of Abraham. This expression of an Italian singer expresses it well: “I do not exist when you are not here, and I remain alone with my thoughts” (*Vorrei*, words and music by F. Guccini). Without a you life is diminished and everything becomes predictable. Without Covenant, without dialogue with that You, deep down there is no longer anything unexpected, we find ourselves stuck in the predictable, as happened before with the Mesopotamians and then the Greeks. So then, we have to settle, as Aeschylus said, “No mortal should stir up thoughts that exceed his mortal condition.” Instead, in calling Abraham, God causes all his human desire to emerge so that he can accept the proposal of the Covenant, perceiving from the beginning how humanly worthwhile

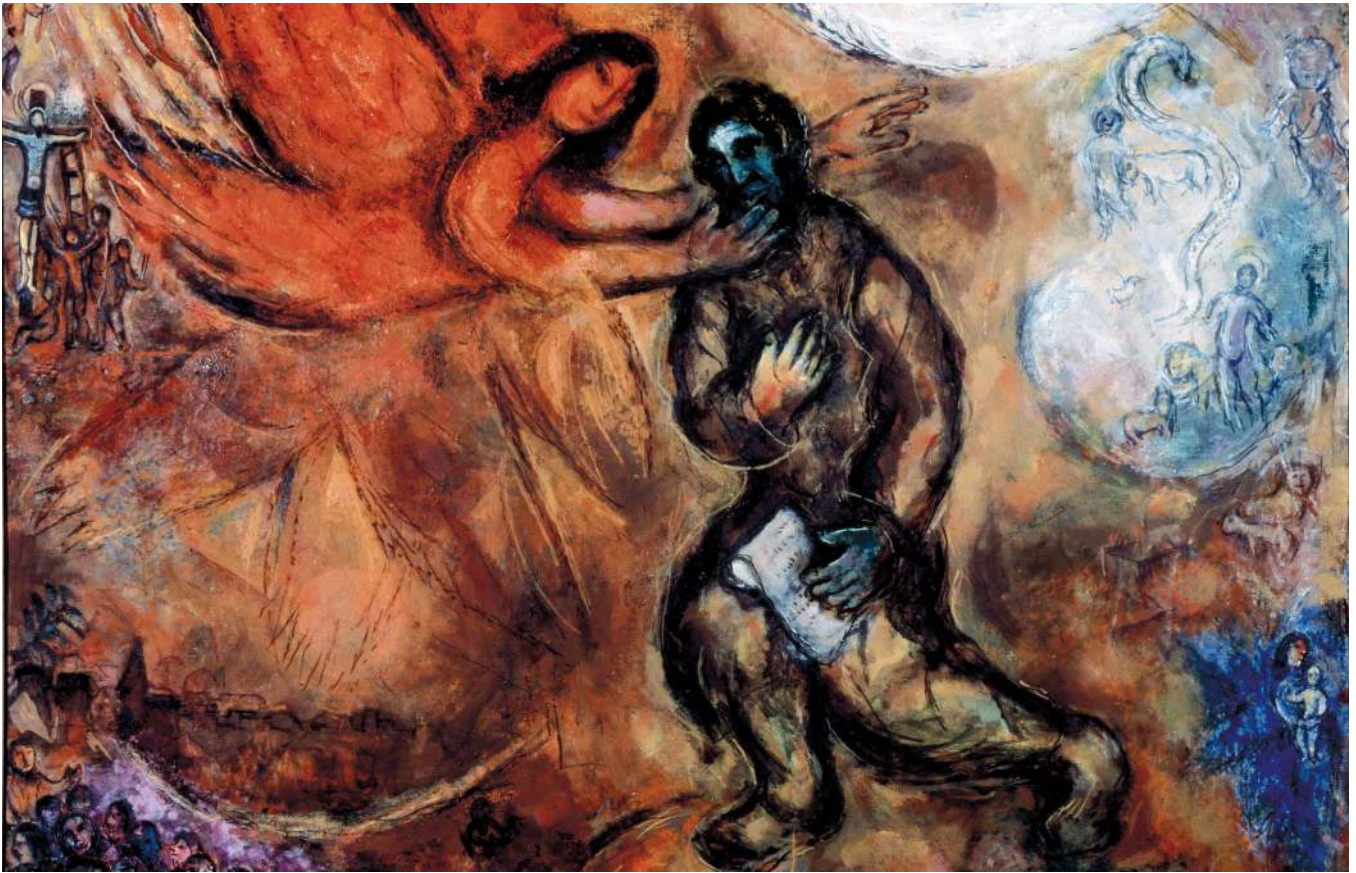
it is. This is not primarily a question of ethics: it concerns the very nature of the “I.” Without that You, without that Alliance, the “I” is not really “I.”

WEILER. I agree. And I think that the Promised Land should also be interpreted this way. It is not just a territory: the “Promised Land” is another type of life, another type of responsibility, another type of relationship between human beings and human beings, and between human beings and God. Shall we go on to the two other revolutions?

MAGGIONI. Certainly! Also because they are the revolutions that this figure of Abraham represents: it is the image of the rupture of the relationship. Certainly, from there begins another type of itinerary. You see it in the exhibit; you understand it reading the texts.

WEILER. As Carrón said, the protagonist of the first revolution is not Abraham, it is God, who offers a relationship almost of parity. “I invite you!” As John Paul II said, “He proposes, He doesn’t impose.” But here are the other revolutions. God decided to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. I’ll read: “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do now that he is to become a great and populous nation, and all the nations of the earth are >>>

Marc Chagall, *The Prophet Isaiah*, 1968, detail. Private collection.



» to find blessing in him? Indeed, I have singled him out that he may direct his sons and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord may carry into effect for Abraham the promised He made about him” (*Gen 18:17-19*). It is a revolutionary proposal because up to this point God has not instructed Abraham, has not given him the law, has not taught him morality. Morality, the ethical sensibility, is rooted in reason, which is part of human nature. This is revolutionary: four thousand years before Immanuel Kant, one finds an interiority that has the ethical sensibility to act with justice before receiving any instruction, even from God. It is something that is part of the human being. This is the second revolution. The third is Abraham’s. God says, “I’m going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.” And Abraham does not reply, “Yes, Lord.” Abraham asks, “How is this possible? And if there were just fifty innocent people in Sodom and Gomorrah? It is possible that you, God, the judge of the whole earth, will fail to act with justice, destroying the innocent with the guilty....” Why is this revolutionary? Because up to this point, if God said something, it meant that in and of itself it was just. Instead, here is the Copernican revolution of justice: “If it is not just, it cannot be of God.” This never happened before in our civilization.

CARRÓN. Why does something that had never happened before happen now for the first time? This is the question to be answered. This newness happens as the consequence of a historic event, of the entrance of the Mystery into history, as I mentioned before. Man, in his constitutive structure, existed before Abraham; but, as Fr. Giussani says, that which is in man as structure, in power, emerges and is actuated only in relationship to a provocation. Thus, an adequate provocation was needed for all the thirst for justice that was in the man Abraham to come to the surface, and for him to converse with God, asking His explanation for His actions. What was needed first of all was for that capacity of the “I” that belongs, as potential, to the human structure, to emerge in its entirety. But for this purpose, a you was needed, the intervention of that You. As we see in the experience of a child, who needs a you—that of a mother—to waken its self-awareness. Without you there is no “I.”

WEILER. I have this idea. I imagine that before saying, “Abraham, I am about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah,” God had decided to put him to the test. God waited and thought, “Let’s see what Abraham will say, whether he accepts, and says, ‘Yes, yes. You spoke well: do it!’” Instead, Abraham was audacious, and rebutted, “How is it possible that You, God, the judge of the whole earth, do not Yourself

act with justice?” Well, at this point, in my flight of fancy, God smiles and says, “Ah, this is what I wanted, this is what I wanted!”

CARRÓN. I am amazed in observing what kind of human being emerges through God’s intervention. In the dialogue of the Covenant between the You of God and Abraham’s “I,” we see all the power of his desire unleashed, and thus a certain kind of man who emerges, with the progression of the history that is born with Abraham. The fact that the psalmist can say, “O God, You are my God, for You I long; for You my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry, weary land without water” (*Psalms* 63:2) makes us understand what a provocation Abraham must have received for that thirst to be awakened. To be able to say “I” with this awareness of the relationship that grounds it, to be reawakened to this point human nature must find itself in front of an adequate provocation.

WEILER. I absolutely agree.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE “I”

MAGGIONI. So, this is the provocation: it is the emergence of this awareness of the “I.” However, as Carrón said, this awareness is not “forever.” It is not a result that, once obtained, has a reality from which one cannot distance oneself. It is a reality in continual becoming, to be reconstructed in every instant...

CARRÓN. At a certain point, Isaiah said, “Your name and Your title are the desire of our souls” (*Is* 26:8). What kind of attraction must man have experienced in front of that Presence, to be able to say, “You are the desire of our souls!”

MAGGIONI. However... You say, “What attraction...!” But at times it seems that we do not sense that attraction, we do not see it, we are no longer able to grasp it. It is the moment in which we have the sensation of the disappearance of the “I.”

First voice. “It used to be that people became adults very early.... [Today there is a continual rush toward immaturity. It used to be] that at all costs, a young man became mature.... [Today, young people] do not know who they are.... They prefer to remain passive.... They live wrapped up in a mysterious torpor. They do not love time. Their only time is a series of instants that are not linked in a chain or organized in a history” (P. Citati, “Questa generazione che non vuol

creocere mai,” [“This generation never wants to grow up”], *la Repubblica*, August 2, 1999, p. 1).

Second voice. “The wound was boredom, invincible boredom, existential boredom that killed time and history, passions and hopes. I do not see sweetness in their eyes.... I see eyes that are stunned, entranced, stupefied, evasive, avid without desire, greedy without greed, solitary in the midst of the crowd that contains them. I see desperate eyes... eternal children... a desperate generation... that advances.... They try to escape from that void of plastic that surrounds and suffocates them. Their salvation lies only in their hearts. We can only look at them with love and trepidation” (E. Scalfari, “Quel vuoto di plastica che soffoca i giovani,” [“That void of plastic that suffocates young people”], *la Repubblica*, August 5, 1999, p. 1).

“Who could have imagined that the long parabola that, from Humanism and the Renaissance—born with the intention of affirming the human—has led us here, would have resulted in this lethargy and existential boredom?” (J. Carrón, Madrid, November 19, 2010).

“The first revolution was in the nature of the conversation between God and man. God offers—does not impose—a Covenant.”

Third voice. “All things conspire to keep silent about us, half out of shame perhaps, half as unutterable hope” (R.M. Rilke, “The Duino Elegies, II,” in *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, Vintage International, translated by Stephen Mitchell, 2009, p. 13).

MAGGIONI. Two contemporary intellectuals, Citati and Scalfari, and a great poet, Rilke, and the sense of comparing that construction of God, with which we started, to *this* moment, in which we sense the dissolution of that unity around which we were moving...

WEILER. I am a Law professor. I teach in the United States, Europe, and Asia. It seems to me that everywhere there is a common approach. The young people who come to my lessons in constitutional law are obsessed with the word *rights*: “the rights of man,” “fundamental rights,” “where are our rights?”...For goodness sake, I surely would not like to live in a society that did not respect the rights of man, the fundamental rights, equality. But there is a word that I never hear: *responsibility*. Duties. Nobody, instead of asking me, “Professor, what are our fundamental rights?” asks, “What are our fundamental duties? And where is our responsibility?” instead of shifting onto others our responsibility for what happens. “It is terrible”, they say. It is always someone else’s responsibility. This is the reduction of the “I,” the anti-Abrahamic message. He is a person who took responsibility for his actions, for his existence, for what **»**

» happened around him. If we talk about reduction, if I think of Rilke, of Scalfari, it is precisely this key word: not *rights* but *responsibilities*, duties.

CARRÓN. The words of Citati, of Scalfari and of Rilke, if we were paying attention, describe well the disappearance of the “I.” But, if the dimensions of the “I” are originally rooted in human nature, how can they disappear over the course of history? How is it that we have gone from the desire to become more of a protagonist, with which Humanism began, to this torpor, this boredom? I find these words of Hannah Arendt very striking: “Modern man did not gain this world when he lost the other world, and he did not gain life, strictly speaking, either.... It is quite conceivable that the modern age—which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity—may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known.” (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

It is a striking line, because it forces us to look at our position again: we think that the story of Abraham is only for the pious, the devout, that it alludes to an ethical question, that the relationship with a you—with that You—is not so necessary for saying “I” with all one’s capacity for response, responsibility, awareness. And instead we see that as soon as this relationship fades, we fall into torpor and boredom. In fact, at a certain moment, the Mystery, who entered into history with Abraham, was perceived by man as something contrary or hostile to himself, and the consequence of this attitude was the disappearance of the “I.” It is significant that certain artistic expressions—I’m thinking of film—seem to return practically to what the ancient and Greco-Roman world was, before the call of Abraham and the coming of Christ. I think of the line in Ingmar Bergman’s film, *Fanny and Alexander* (1982): “We Ekdahls have not come into the world to see through it. We are not equipped for such excursions.... We must live in the little world. We will be content with that and cultivate it and make the best of it.... So shall it be. [The predictable returns] Therefore let us be happy while we are happy. Let us be kind, generous, affectionate and good. It is necessary and not at all shameful to take pleasure in the little world [In what does life consist?]. Good food... gentle smiles... fruit trees in blossom, waltzes....” This is what the “I” has become, since the fading of the awareness of that constitutive relationship, which for us today is mostly reduced to a sort of spirituality, ethics, religious fable for visionaries. We pay the price for this disappearance in our torpor, our settling for less: lacking the provocation, we do not feel a surge of desire

“We see that as soon as this relationship fades, we fall into torpor and boredom.”

to respond, the wellspring of all the power, the creative capacity of the “I.”

WEILER. I agree, but I would like to add a caveat. I am religious, but we mustn’t think that we religious have the truth and the secular, because of the lack of God in their lives, are condemned to a reduction of the “I.” This reduction can also happen in the religious person.

CARRÓN. Nietzsche had foreseen this. Announcing the “death of God,” he did not think that religion was finished, but that a certain type of religion would remain, one incapable of reawakening the “I.”

WEILER. Secular atheists can have a full life, their promised land, and can shoulder their responsibility. Here the danger is pride, *hubris*. You know the saying that I like most out of all the prophets: “You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God” (*Micah* 6:8). So, remember, *humbly*.

MAGGIONI. It was no coincidence, I believe, that the three readings we began with were not from religious men; did not arrive from a strictly religious dimension...

CARRÓN. As we see, we religious people are not the only ones who say these things; they are the observation of what is happening. I am always amazed how well Giussani identified the drama of our times, what you, Joseph, called “lack of responsibility”: it is the disappearance of something, of the “motility” of the “I” as he says. It is not so much a problem of ethical weakness: “I would like to point out a difference between the generations of young people today and those of young people I encountered thirty years ago. It seems that the difference lies in a greater weakness of awareness one has now; a weakness not of ethics but of energy of awareness” (L. Giussani, *L’io rinasce in un incontro. 1986-1987 [The “I” Is Reborn in an Encounter]*, Bur, Milano 2010, p. 181). It is not that young people today are more lazy or less lazy, not that they make more or fewer mistakes: we always make the same mistakes. The question is that the capacity to adhere to something different from oneself has disappeared. In order to adhere, there must be a sufficient attraction, one able to move the “I.” The relationship—the you—is not secondary or incidental, but is a constitutive part of the definition of the “I”: “I am nothing when you are not present.” This is the crucial relationship.

WEILER. If we have two minutes, I would like to ask Carrón



Marc Chagall, *Abraham and the Three Angels*, 1960-1966. Nice, Musée national Marc Chagall.

a question. I think many people share it but maybe are afraid to ask it. It concerns the famous story of Abraham and Isaac. God calls Isaac and says, "Take your son." In the midrash Abraham responds, "I have two." "Your unique son." And he says, "They both are unique." "The son you love." "I love both..." "Take Isaac and go kill him!" And Abraham does not even say, "Yes Lord." Wordless, he sets out on the journey. One can think, isn't it a bit like these fundamentalists today, who in the name of God are ready to commit tremendous crimes? How do we respond to this challenge of Abraham?

CARRÓN. This is a challenge to which we must respond, because it is a crucial question: what can move a person to take an invitation like that seriously? What must Abraham have seen and experienced? How must that Presence have been so interwoven with his "I" that he could even take into consideration such a command? How can a man respond to a provocation of the kind? In the Covenant that God establishes with Abraham there is the beginning of a story that moves forward, evolves, that takes steps and progresses. God began from what was there, from the "I," just as it was at the beginning, with all its difficulties and all its limits, proposing a Covenant to bind him to Himself. The stories in the Bible are full of the limitations of man; there is no mythologizing about man because real man is awakened by

a You. Accepting this challenge, which at first sight seems unreasonable, Abraham finally discovered the true face of his God, who did not want the death of Isaac, but desired to bind Abraham to Himself, because precisely when man breaks off this relationship, we have this torpor, invincible boredom, and void that is not innocuous, as we see.

Video of images from the RaiNews24 reportage on the terrorist attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices and the Hyper Cacher supermarket in Paris on January 7, 2015.

THE CHALLENGE OF EDUCATION

MAGGIONI. We do not want to reduce this piece of the present, this piece of history, this contemporary challenge to the question of "the void of the 'I,'" but this question is there within, as is the question of responsibility spoken of before. So then, in those days after the massacres of Paris, in the days that threw before our eyes the emergency we are living, Julián Carrón wrote to the Italian daily newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*:

"Dear Editor, Since the events in Paris happened, there has been a great deal of discussion; nobody has been spared a sense of bewilderment or fear. The numerous analyses offered have brought forth interesting points for reflecting on and understanding such a complex phenomenon. >>>

Marc Chagall, *Circumcision Prescribed by God to Abraham*, 1931, detail. Nice, Musée national Marc Chagall.



» But a month later, now that the routine of daily life has taken over again, what remains? What can keep these disturbing events from rapidly being erased from our memory? To help us remember, it is necessary to discover the true nature of the challenge posed by the Paris attacks.”

The nature of the challenge, certainly. But Carrón’s analysis did not stop “there.”

“For this reason, the problem is primarily within Europe, and the most important part is played here at home. The true challenge is cultural, its terrain is daily life. When those who abandon their homelands arrive here in search of a better life, when their children are born and become adults in the West, what do they see? Can they find something able to attract their humanity, to challenge their reason and their freedom? The same problem exists for our children: do we have something to offer them that speaks to their search for fulfilment and meaning? In many young people who have grown up in the so-called Western world there reigns a great nothingness, a profound void that constitutes the origin of the desperation that ends up in violence.” (J. Carrón, “La sfida del vero dialogo dopo gli attentati di Parigi” [“The Challenge of True Dialogue After the Attacks in Paris”], *Corriere della Sera*, February, 13, 2015, p.27. English translation available at <http://english.clonline.org/>).

Julián, in those days one of the most successful tactics of

those who always want to distance themselves from the problem was to say that that story has nothing to do with us, that it was the emblem of an “us” and a “them,” of a distance, of something that precisely because it is *other than us* becomes this way. In writing this letter to the Editor, you tragically, painfully, brought that piece of history inside *our* camp, inside *our* experience.

CARRÓN. Because that is the way it is. It is something we have in our own home. I am not referring just to those who arrive from other countries, but to our children too, our friends, teachers with their students. The question of Abraham is interesting precisely because it poses the same problem: is there something able to reawaken the “I” and to offer an adequate response to that desire of fulfilment that we all have? If this does not happen, what dominates is the void. You cannot respond to this void with ideological opposition; it is unable to attract the “I,” to awaken it. Rather, it generates even more violence and conflict. Through our history, in Europe we have learned that there is no relationship with truth except through freedom. Therefore, now that we are witnessing a continual flow of people from different cultures and religions, different lifestyles and expressions, do we want to co-exist with them? What is needed for this to happen? What do we

need, in our luggage, to be able to respond to the challenge that is in our home? This is the emergency of education that concerns all of us. Is there something that can adequately attract, that can challenge a person of a different culture who reaches our shores? Can we offer something that is more interesting than violence? That is more interesting than torpor and boredom? Do we have something to propose to the new generations? As we were saying, the problem is first of all not one of ethics, and is not resolved with an appeal to morality; it is an existential, fundamental problem resolved only if man finds something that corresponds to his constitutive needs, that makes him want to get involved, to build and live in peace. Yesterday we listened to Fr. Ibrahim tell about a Muslim who went to the well of the Franciscan convent and said, “Father, to see how the people come to draw water, with big smiles, with great peace in their hearts, without fighting, without raising their voices, I who have been all over Aleppo and see what they do, how they kill each other to draw water from the wells, I am amazed: you are different, full of peace, of joy.” The question then, is whether there is something that we can point out in the reality—whatever its origin may be—that can offer a positive contribution to the situation in which we find ourselves, that we see increasingly often. This is the challenge of education.

WEILER. Here I would like to challenge you a bit.

CARRÓN. I’m willing, otherwise I’ll get bored!

MAGGIONI. This is what we were waiting for...

WEILER. Here, notwithstanding our defects, we have a culture of tolerance. We have a Meeting with a specific orientation, but that is not afraid to invite a Jew with a different point of view.

CARRÓN. Absolutely, yes.

WEILER. We have a democracy, even if it is not perfect—democracy is never perfect, but imperfect democracy is better than any other system. We have a continual search for justice; we never reach it, but we seek justice. We also have a rich culture. We have so much to offer. Even accepting the fact that there is a void in current life, our world is nonetheless civil and rich. It is important; we have to insist on this. I would also like to avoid the temptation to say that this void in life explains a certain behaviour. It may explain it, but it doesn’t justify it, because the person is responsible for his actions.

CARRÓN. This is the issue: how does this treasure we have accumulated over the course of history, and which you have described very well, endure? Because, as Goethe said, “What from your father you’ve inherited, you must earn again, to own it straight” (cf. *Faust*, vv. 682–683, A. S. Kline, 2003). As Benedict XVI said, only if every generation engages anew in a process of education can they “build on the knowledge and experience of those who went before,” “draw upon the moral treasury of the whole of humanity” (cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical letter *Spe Salvi*, 24–25). This is truly the great companionship we give each other. How can we transmit that richness we call “tradition” in an attractive way, and not end up destroying everything, disregarding the value of the effort the generations before us have made to reach this point? How can we propose it in such an attractive way that our contemporaries will discover it as a good for themselves and need not always destroy it and start again? This is the challenge.



“This is the emergency of education. Can we offer something that is more interesting than violence?”

MAGGIONI. You say that the greatest emergency of all is education. We have chosen that photo of Sebastião Salgado that is part of the magnificent series of *Genesis*. Looking at it, looking at those penguins, I see something that is both very beautiful and very ugly. I read the power of education, the model to follow, the thing that brings you toward your inclination,

but I also read the mainstream. None of them decides to jump in at a different point, none of them engages its own “I” and says “I’m going to jump in over there.” We live in an era in which “penguinism,” seems very strong: it is a factor that is found in our constructs of story-telling, our constructs of thought, and of man. And so it is here that it becomes a challenge of education. Professor Weiler...

WEILER. Well, two minutes ago I said we have so much to offer. Democracy, fundamental rights, tolerance, etc. But we also have to be honest because I have always held that our Western civilization has two foundations: on the one hand, Athens, the Enlightenment, neo-Kantianism, rights, etc., and on the other hand, the Judeo-Christian tradition. Today we all know—you can’t travel around Italy without seeing it—that this is an integral part of our civilization. “Saint Jürgen Habermas” himself admitted that in order to truly speak about fundamental rights, the roots of >>

» the Christian tradition are fundamental. However, this fact is denied. We all remember the ugly matter of the European Constitution: it was impossible to even mention the fact that together with the Enlightenment, Christianity formed part of the roots of European tradition. So then, in response to your question about how can we do this I would say, we have learned one thing, that we cannot impose this tradition!

CARRÓN. Because we have learned that the one relationship with truth is that which passes through freedom.

WEILER. Right! So then, the response is testimony, living a life that is an integral part of what we have to offer others, and ourselves. This is more than attractive, it is *compelling*. You cannot live without it. But it is possible only through example, through testimony.

CARRÓN. But precisely this is the challenge because, in the words of our friend Antonio Polito, with whom I presented the book on education, “our society is aged in its hopes and expectations” (A. Polito, *Contro i papà* [Against the Fathers], Rizzoli, Milan 2012, p. 144). Or, as Fr. Giussani said, “to all these generations of men, nothing has been proposed.” What was missing was precisely this testimony. Fr. Giussani goes on to say that many are only concerned about proposing “the assurance of a comfortable life, a life without risks” (*L’avvenimento cristiano* [The Christian Event], Bur, Milan 2003, p. 126), sparing their children the toil needed to make their own what their parents have achieved: we want to spare them this, but in doing so we help them dig their own grave.

WEILER. Excuse me, I can’t help saying that eleven years ago I came here with my family and today the Meeting is very special for me, because one of my daughters is here today, who was 10 years old back then and is now 21. She’s that blond girl with her hair dyed purple (the colour of the Florence football team): very significant after yesterday’s match for you Milan fans, don’t you think?

FROM WHENCE CAN WE START AGAIN?

MAGGIONI. Yes, there is the story of all us here... But the problem at this point is clear. We started with Abraham, and have seen the system enter into a crisis, and thus now the question is, from whence do we start again? Among the many, many important things Benedict XVI reminded us, one is “Good structures help [and I personally believe very

much that good structures help: they are fundamental, we cannot do without them], but of themselves they are not enough. Man can never be redeemed simply from the outside.” (*Spe Salvi*, 25). So then, I would like to propose a final provocation: from whence can we begin again?

First voice. “A crisis forces us to return to the questions; it demands of us new or old answers, as long as they flow from a direct examination; it becomes a catastrophe only when we try to face it with preconceived judgements, that is, prejudices, thus aggravating the crisis and worse yet, giving up on living the experience of reality, using the opportunity to reflect, that the crisis itself constitutes” (translated from the Italian translation of H. Arendt, *Tra Passato e Futuro* [Between Past and Future], Garzanti, Milano 1991, p. 229).

Second voice. “The solution is a battle to save—not the battle to stop the shrewdness of civilization, but the battle to rediscover, to testify, man’s dependence on God... The greatest danger today is... the attempt by the reigning power to destroy the human. [our true resource]. And the essence of the human is freedom, i.e., the relationship with the infinite. Therefore, it is mainly in the West that the great battle must be fought by the man who feels himself to be a man: the battle between authentic religiosity and power. The limit of power is true religiosity—the limit of any power: civil, political, and ecclesiastic.” (L. Giussani, “Christ: All We Have,” *Traces*, n. 2, vol. 4, 2002, p.V).

Third voice. “Gladness is the reverberation of the certainty of happiness, of the Eternal, and it comes from certainty and the will to journey [a certainty that sets us on the road], awareness of the journey one is making... Being glad is the indispensable condition for generating a different world, a different humanity... gladness is like a cactus flower, that in a plant of thorns generates something beautiful” (L. Giussani, *Un evento reale nella vita dell’uomo 1990-1991* [A Real Event in the Life of Man], Bur, Milano 2013, pp. 240-241).

MAGGIONI. “Beauty is what will save us,” says Pope Francis. Beauty, gladness, the overcoming of the crisis, in the words of Hannah Arendt, as we heard at the beginning.

Violin (J.S. Bach, Adagio from *Sonata n.1 in E minor* for solo violin BWV 1001).

WEILER. One needs a minute to recover, because...

CARRÓN. Exactly, it is precisely from here that one begins again! From this moment in which one is grasped again,

“The response is testimony, living a life that is an integral part of what we have to offer.”



Marc Chagall, *The Tree of Jesse*, 1975, detail. Private collection.

because there is something in reality that attracts him more than everything that is lacking, all the limits he has, all the *tumult* in which he is immersed. There is a moment, before something like this music, before beauty, in which the “I” begins again. Nothing is needed. It just has to happen.

WEILER. The “*spirto gentil*”?

CARRÓN. Exactly, the *spirto gentil*.

WEILER. These words of Giussani’s merit re-reading: “Therefore, it is mainly in the West that the great battle must be fought by the man who feels himself to be a man: the battle between authentic religiosity and power. The limit of power is true religiosity—the limit of any power: civil, political, and ecclesiastic.” An important message. From whence can one begin again? From the beauty of this self-critical spirit, ready to limit himself. And maybe one can re-visit God’s “Go forth” to Abraham. “Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you.” We have not yet spoken about the *personality* of Abraham. This initiative requires courage, determination. Throwing everything behind you, throwing away what is comforting, comfortable, and all with the ideal of a Promised Land, of beginning a new journey. This message is also part of the answer to the question about from whence to start again: with courage!

CARRÓN. In his message to the Meeting, Pope Francis

seized on “the” question: “In the face of the [strange anaesthesia], our numbness in life, how can one’s conscience be awakened again?” (*Message for the 36th Meeting of Rimini*, 20-26 August 2015). How can the “I” be reawakened? This is the crucial question with which all the visions, all the proposals, all the institutions, all, all, must come to grips. Only those who have an answer to this question can give a real contribution to facing that disappearance of the “I” that we are witnessing. This is an opportunity for everyone. I was struck that in 1992, in a terrible situation, Fr. Giussani said, “And yet, paradoxically, cutting across all the positions, there are people who instead have a rare sensibility, one difficult to find. It is a fact that happens rarely and cuts across positions. We hope that these people can give what they have. Then it would be possible to buffer, to limit the damage...Who knows whether this desire to make one’s children’s lives less difficult... breaks through... the horizon.” That is, whether those who have this desire to help their children or fellow travellers understand that, to be able to do so, they need to propose an ideal, a hope. “When I spoke about this quality of cutting across, I was thinking above all of certain Jews and Muslims who seem closer to what we said before, to the sensibility that can break through the horizon” (L. Giussani, *L’avvenimento cristiano*, op. cit., pp. 125-127). Every person who possesses this rare sensibility, no matter what its origin, no matter where it comes from, has the opportunity to give a contribution. It is an opportunity for us Christians as well, to give the testimony of a changed life. This is the fas- ➤➤

» cination of the present moment. I am amazed that the Pope, instead of complaining about the situation, as often happens, still affirms: “For the Church, this opens up a fascinating journey, as was the case at the beginning of Christianity [stripped of everything, as it was at the beginning of Christianity], when people kept themselves busy in a life without the courage, strength, or seriousness to ask decisive questions” (Francis, *Message for the 36th Meeting of Rimini*, 20-26 August 2015). It is a road for reawakening the human “I.” What is the road, what is the modality with which the person discovers her truth, the truth of herself? Fr. Giussani, again, is masterful: “The human person recognizes the truth of herself through the experience of beauty, through the experience of gusto, through the experience of correspondence, through the experience of attraction that it [the truth one encounters] evokes, a total attraction and correspondence, not total quantitatively, but total qualitatively! ... The beauty of the truth is what makes me say: ‘It’s the truth!’” (*Certi di alcune grandi cose. 1979-1981 [Certain of a Few Great Things]*, Bur, Milano 2007, pp. 219-220); the attraction it generates, inasmuch as it attracts me, is what makes me say this. Therefore the person, the “I,” finds himself again in an encounter with beauty incarnate in a witness. Testimony is the only way to serve the truth, a way that is at the same time respectful of the freedom of the other and of the possibility of proposal; a proposal that is not a theory, a lesson, but what Fr. Giussani called a working hypothesis incarnate in someone. Therefore he identified the true challenge in saying that what is missing is not the verbal or cultural repetition of the announcement. In fact, he insisted on the fact that people today expect, even unconsciously, to find on their road people whose lives are changed (cf. *L’avvenimento cristiano*, op. cit., pp. 23-24) by the encounter with Christ or with their own religious form. We are all awaiting this adequate provocation that causes the potential of the “I” to emerge. The important thing is for this provocation to be seen in the gladness of one’s face, because “being glad is the indispensable condition for generating... a different humanity” (L. Giussani, *Un evento reale nella vita dell’uomo. 1990-1991 [A Real Event in the Life of Man]*, Bur, Milano 2013, p. 240). Inviting Christians to nourish the desire to witness, the Pope underlined that “in this way alone can the liberating message of the love of God and the salvation that Christ offers be proposed in its strength, beauty and simplicity. One can only move forward in this way, with an attitude of respect [of humility] for people; this is offering the essence of the Gospel” (*Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants*

“The important thing is for this provocation to be seen in the gladness of one’s face.”

in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, February 7, 2015). Therefore, the question is simple: “Do we Christians still believe in the capacity of the faith we have received to attract those we encounter, and in the living fascination of its disarming beauty?” (J. Carrón, “*The Challenge of...*” *Corriere della Sera*, op. cit.).

WEILER. You are a bold man, Julián Carrón. Just think how counter-cultural it is to choose the figure of Abraham and place it at the center of the Meeting! That requires boldness. And we have to acknowledge the same boldness in Monica Maggioni, newly elected President of the RAI (Italian national television). You are also bold for coming here to moderate a panel that puts Abraham at the center of the discussion...

MAGGIONI. It happens...

WEILER. It is your spirit, Fr. Carrón. Also the spirit of Giussani. One can say, “All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you.”

MAGGIONI. Thank you! This happens when one meets people who change life. People with rare sensibility, like that of Abraham. People who are able to break through the horizon, and so one understands how it is, the circle from which everything started, and on which everything comes to a close.

Violin (J.S. Bach, Andante from *Sonata n.2 in F minor* for solo violin BWV 1003).

First voice. “*The Lord said to Abraham: ‘Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you’*” (Gen 12:1-3).

MAGGIONI. Thank you! Thank you Roberto, the violinist; Matteo, Giampiero and Federica, the readers. Thanks to all of you. Thank you for the things that unite us and for those that divide us, for the equalities and the differences. Thank you!



TO SEE THE video of the encounter (that you find in www.tracesonline.org, capture this code with your smartphone (the cellphone must have a QR Reader app).

“I’VE NEVER SEEN A PLACE LIKE THIS”

Stories and faces from 80 countries. 450 people at the foot of Monte Cervino for the **INTERNATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF RESPONSIBLES**. Many “companions on the road,” who came together with their diverse experiences to rediscover “what happened” and how to be a daily witness.

BY PAOLA BERGAMINI





It was the last night of the International Assembly. Before dinner, I was sitting at the bar with Mauro, native of Catania, Italy, living in Dublin for over 30 years, originally provoked by an invitation from Fr. Giussani just after his graduation from college. He risked his whole life on it. With a beer in hand he said, “What loaded days! So many ‘sparks.’ When you see the smoke from Mount Etna, you know it’s not nothing, but when the streams of lava start pouring out it means something is really moving. Something has happened and is happening. Here, we have more than a stream...”

This sums up the five days in Cervinia. Montale said, “The only hope is something unforeseen.” They were days full of this “unfore-

seen,” for those who have lived the experience for many years, for those who met the Movement recently and were told “come,” and even for some well-known names who found their way because of something correspondent they saw in the

“What is the method God has used in history? He chose a man, Abraham, to reawaken an ‘I.’”

eyes of a friend. The traces of a Presence that embraces, goes out to meet, and changes—first of all—you. I’ll try to recount what happened, keeping in mind the message from a poster in 1992: “In every vocational companionship there are always people, or moments in the lives of people, to look to. The

most important thing in the companionship is to look at the people.”

Wednesday evening, I was on the stairs going up to the meeting room with Guenda. My friendship with her started a year ago at the same

gathering. “How are you?” I asked. “Good. One step at a time, certain of the action of the Lord. We’ll see what He gives us.” Singing “Come Holy Spirit” is not mechanical. It’s the prayer that “He will fulfill that for which He made us,” giving us all that we need in everyday life within this history we belong to. Because “the circumstances that God has us live are an essential factor of our vocation, or the mission He calls us to,” as Fr. Giussani has said.

Carrón begins from this. Deep down, each day is this invitation to become more aware of the context we are called to live in, since Christianity is lived in the concreteness of daily life. This awareness is the test of how we live our belonging, and so of our cultural expression. It’s a challenge to what we hold most dear. The circumstances we live are marked by the collapse of evidences, including those of the faith, which are so often taken for granted. So these certainties are set



TESTIMONIES. On these pages, some moments during the International Assembly of Responsibles. Above, (from left) Andrew Davison, Fr. Stefano Alberto and Constantin Sigov. Left, Fr. Javier Prades and Fr. Julián Carrón.

aside as we fall into defending an ethical system of values. So, how do we begin again? What is the method God has used in history? He chose a man, Abraham, to reawaken an “I—and this still happens today. He chooses one person to reach others. Do we believe it’s possible?”

FROM BRASIL TO CALIFORNIA. Hearing “*La mente torna*” (“My Mind Returns”) by the famous Italian Mina was a surprise. “When you arrive, my mind returns,” Carrón repeats, introducing the Assembly. When the Mystery comes to us, as He did for Abraham, our “I” shines forth, so that those around say “What happened to him?” The contributions were this gaze that carries something new. No analyses, just facts. Bracco spoke about children making noise during Mass. Fr. Pepe, in London, recounted an e-mail he received, a woman asking to “belong” to the parish. He went to visit her; she’s hadn’t been baptized, nor

had anyone in her family. So what inspired her? “I work as a nanny. Over the years, I’ve seen something’s different in the children at your school, in your parish. With the parents too, and I want that for my life.”

Guido tells of his work in Los Angeles, with a non-profit that helps employ people with disabilities and war veterans, including one woman who is 40 years old. Her life has been devastated; she was afraid of everything. After a year working with him, she told him, “I used to wake up at three in the morning and hear the birds chirping. It drove me crazy; I wanted to kill them. Now I still wake up at three, but I’ve grown to love the birds singing outside. Do you know why? I’ve met someone who

reawakened the possibility for me to be myself. Now my heart is alive.” Fear is overcome. Not through her analysis but from a gaze and a life full of the certainty of faith. Before saying the *Angelus*, Carrón has just one suggestion: continue to discuss among yourselves in order to understand even more.

WHO I AM. I had coffee with Fr. Heriberto, from the island of Mauritius, and Laura, an Italian who had lived there for over 20 years, begging God almost that long that the Movement be present there. Through a series of events, a small community was born. Fr. Heriberto, at the request of the bishop, began to work with them, not knowing anything about CL. They told us their story and he, looking around, said, “I’ve never seen a place like this, where I can really be myself.”

I spend the afternoon with Wael Farouq, a Muslim professor of Arabic at the Catholic University of Milan, and first and foremost a friend. He is painfully aware of all the violence committed by ISIS in the name of Allah. He starts out saying

that a Muslim does nothing without first saying “In the name of Allah, merciful Father.” But even this can be reduced to a mere formality, and can even turn to violence. He tells of when he first met Paolo, nine years before. “Meeting the Movement made me see and understand who I am. Many Muslims

like me need a gaze like this. Today I’m here to tell about my experience of friendship, beauty, and truth.” After dinner, Giorgio Vittadini elaborated on the Meeting. With 36 years behind him, »

“Today I’m here to tell about my experience of friendship, beauty, and truth.”

» throughout the week he moderated 15 presentations. He could have said, “No more! I’ve done enough.” But instead he had a contagious energy (knowing him, he may have even surprised himself!) as he described the guests who spoke, and the people behind the scenes, ‘in action,’ the true builders of the Meeting. It’s an example of what Pope Francis calls the Church “which goes forth.”

“WHAT DOES SHE SEE?” With Vittadini, Oliverio Gonzalez from Mexico gave a witness. Gonzalez knows what it is like to despair, having seen his father kidnapped and killed, and then himself overtaken by drugs. It was only the companionship of his friends that could help him hold his head up again and take over the family business. Then came the story of Enrico Craighero who spoke about his twins, both born with severe disabilities. A tough situation. Then one evening, while spoon-feeding one of them, he looked up and saw the joy in his wife’s eyes as she was doing the same thing. He asked himself, “What does she see that I don’t?” Slowly, a reality which “stunk,” (as an atheist writer who had a son with disabilities put it) became enjoyable. Not only for them, but also for those they met.

Friday morning, Marta sings, and the words of the song “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” appeared on the screen: “What a fellowship, what a divine joy, leaning on the everlasting arms.” On stage, Pietro Modiano, president of the Association of the Airports of Milan; Eugenio Mazzarella, professor of Theoretical

Philosophy in Naples; and Monica Maggioni, the new president of RAI media (who immediately explained “I’m speaking here as Monica Maggioni,”) prepared to present Carrón’s new book *Disarmed Beauty*. It was not the typical “cultural” presentation. How could it be? These faces, in various ways, had become companions on the journey, friends.

Modiano told of his “fortuitous” encounter—“the circumstance” as he called it—with CL. Politically on the left, he had strong prejudices against the Movement. The experience, which bears the truth and at the same time is so welcoming—rich in human terms seems a contradiction—became a fascinating hypothesis for his life. Now that all the walls in his life had crumbled—the Communist ideal and the world of finance—he saw the conflict between power and religiosity as the real question of life.

Mazzarella noted that disarmed beauty, “which isn’t just a nice-sounding title,” it is the beauty that disarms those who go out to meet reality; it’s faith in action. This means that the question in Luke’s Gospel, “When the Son of man comes again, will He find faith on earth?” becomes even more relevant today, with Europe in crisis, with the anthropological crisis. The only road remaining is to encounter the other, who is a good, a resource for me.

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SAYING I’M SORRY. Maggioni started off speaking about that “gray area,” as she defined it, that area in which the “I” is called upon to respond, is challenged. This is the area that the powers-that-be would like to elimi-



nate. She’d seen it in recent events—from the Charlie Hebdo massacre to the big rig found in a parking lot with 70 dead bodies of refugees inside—both of which she reported on for her work. What does that have to do with the book? “Every time an event like that shakes my life, I picked it up again to read.” Not a survival guide, but rather a roadmap for the journey that “I have to take myself.” Fr. Giussani’s words are no longer a mantra to repeat at the right moment; now they’ve taken on flesh through encounters. Once again, just as from the other two presenter, we hear that word: encounter.

Carrón walked onto stage and left everyone speechless by asking forgiveness. Forgiveness for all the times that we impose our own filters to this beauty which could shine through any one of us. In a disarming way, that hour and a half became the chance to “discover the true nature of what happened to us.” He embraced each one of them. “Oh what fellowship, what joy divine, leaning on the everlasting arms.”



Over lunch Sr. Giovanna, a 62-year-old Trappist nun who has been in the Philippines for 20 years, talks about Parini High School where, after the crisis in 1968, GS was reduced to only five members. She talked about discovering her vocation when she was 16, about her conversations with Fr. Giussani and her work in the convent. Ten minutes into it, all those who happened to have ended up at her table were rapt in attention. One of them asked her, “I’m getting married in two weeks. Will you pray for me?”

That afternoon, Javier Prades continued the theme of the morning speaking about witness: the truth is an event, and the way it is communicated is through a witness. The Spanish theologian helped us to discover “witness” as a form of knowing, to recognize how we often reduce things. Even here, it is not a problem of the intellect, but of an attraction, a ‘spark,’ as Fr. Giussani called it, that catalyzes a new awareness of one’s true origin. That origin that each of us have seen in our encounter with Christianity.

That evening, Orthodox editor and philosopher Constantin Sigov and Anglican priest Andrew Davison spoke about that same attraction, and showed themselves companions on the road, belonging to their own tradition.

The next day we hiked to the chapel of Notre Dame de La Garge, with Monte Cervino at our backs. Every so often, we paused and turned to see the summit which stood out against the clear sky. The long line of 450 people from all over the world, walking together in silence, stuns you.

Earlier Fr. Pino told us that a hike is a paradigm for our life: there’s a road, a destination, and someone to follow. I sat to eat my sack lunch with Prof. Mazzarella, who at that moment was not a university professor or lofty philosopher, but a friend. We spoke about our families, about our children who are the

same age, and about the book of poetry he had jotted down during these “strange and beautiful days.” We listened (since I’m tone-deaf and he’s a Neopolitan with little experience with Canti Alpini, thus making singing along difficult) enchanted by the choir.

WHAT YOU TREASURE. At dinner, I sat once again with Prof. Mazzarella. We discussed questions raised by new technologies and the encyclical *Laudato Si’*. He was bombarded by questions, and asked his own of us. Drinking his Génépi he commented, “What’s amazed me in my time here is the hunger each of you has for knowledge. Elsewhere you go, all you find is emptiness or, at best, a ‘know it all’ attitude.”

That evening, brief segments of the videos of Fr. Ibrahim, Fr. Pizzaballa, the Trappist sisters in Syria and little Myriam stream across the screen—the witness of Christians in the Middle East. A phrase on the last slide challenged us: “They give their lives for what they hold most dear. What is it that you treasure?” On Sunday morning, Carrón gave a review of all that had happened before our eyes, of the beauty that attracted us because it is the “splendor of truth.” Being a witness of this simply means

communicating the experience we’ve had of faith, an Event who became our friend and companion.

This is the challenge: to live Christianity as the attraction that draws our whole life and which can only maintain our interest if we are poor in Spirit and ask to be able to adhere. **T**

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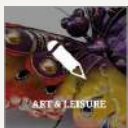
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